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Editorial Notebook

Politically Correct: False Slogan

On April Fool's Day the Smithsonian Institution's American history division held its first annual conference on the history of Jell-O. Scholarly papers were read, tongue in cheek. Exhibits were judged for jiggle, odor, level of disgust and, satirizing the hot cliché of the day, political correctness.

Praise to the Jell-O historians for treating the slogan with the scorn it deserves. Political correctness has been put forth as a successor to the collapsed Soviet threat — as a new Evil Empire. In fact, it's a bogymen magnified by leftover cold war hysteria.

Conservatives have successfully established the phrase as a term of ridicule for even honorable liberal ideas. Now commentators and journalists carelessly invoke it at every turn: when it is suggested that racial, sexual or religious epithets are beyond the bounds of civility; when a political party chastens a member; when, Heaven forbid, there is discussion of teaching something other than Western history in civilization courses. Critics of art, pop culture and even opera throw the term around in their reviews.

Slogans are the habitat of small minds. "Politically correct" impoverishes discourse more than most. It seeks to reduce all differences of opinion to a single one: the difference between liberals and conservatives. And since the term equates liberalism with intellectual tyranny, the argument is closed before the issues are ever joined.

The fever about political correctness first struck in the

Cold War Rhetoric Finds a Bogymen

academic world, where it is often claimed that liberal orthodoxies have won the day by intimidation. Politically correct administrators are said to be banishing conservative scholars; imperiling Western culture by fawning on Papuan and Zulu studies; flooding colleges with unqualified black students; brainwashing collegians with abject pacifism.

There have, surely, been grounds for complaint about liberal orthodoxy. Some conservatives have been exiled for their views. Even moderates and liberals have held their tongues for fear of offending modern mandarins. The problem with political correctness as an idea is that mandarins of the right have exaggerated it for ideological effect.

No evil empire is necessary, for example, to account for a junior faculty member's sacking. Tenure battles have always been bloody affairs, turning on a variety of subjective, often superficial criteria. If so powerful a liberal juggernaut were at work on campus, conspiring to smuggle legions of unqualified blacks into universities, why did black enrollment fall dramatically for much of the 70's and 80's? If pacifist activism were such a prized goal of the politically correct, why did no campus peace movement materialize during the war in the Persian Gulf?

Much of the hoopla about political correctness reflects cold war hysteria redux. Ambient fear of the Soviet empire has found a bogymen. But the cold war is over now. Isn't it?

BRENT STAPLES